

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 08 TEL AVIV 002200

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Sharon Visit April 14

Key stories in the media:

The joint White House press conference of President Bush and PM Sharon at the White House Wednesday, and the subsequent exchange of letters between them, dominate the media. Bush endorsed Sharon's disengagement plan, calling it "brave and courageous." Yediot bannered a comment by Sharon: "This is a commitment, the likes of which we never received from America." Israel Radio quoted Israel's Ambassador to the U.S. as saying that this is a tremendous diplomatic achievement that will bring hope to the peace process, and that it represents a hint that the PA should renounce support for terrorism. The radio reported that Sharon's flight home was delayed by three hours following his demand to see the final version of Bush's letter, and that the State Department tried to tone down its contents until the last moment.

Ha'aretz and other media reported that Bush's letter states that Israel will not return to the 1949 armistice lines and that Palestinian refugees will not return to Israel. Some commentators wondered about the meaning of the term "rather than" in Bush's remark at the press conference, which called for "the establishment of a Palestinian state and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than Israel." The media also reported that, in his letter, Bush said "new realities on the ground" -- meaning concentrations of Jewish settlers in the territories -- would have to be taken in consideration. Israel Radio quoted a senior member of Sharon's delegation as saying that a document appended to Bush's letter says that details about the fence route around Ariel will be clarified. Sharon's letter states: "According to this [the disengagement] plan, the State of Israel intends to relocate military installations and all Israeli villages and towns in the Gaza Strip, as well as other military installations and a small number of villages in Samaria [the northern West Bank]. In his letter, Sharon also pledges to limit the growth of settlements, remove unauthorized outposts and allow freedom of movement for "Palestinians not engaged in terrorism."

Leading media reported that Sharon declined to meet with Democratic presidential contender Sen. John Kerry. Israel Radio noted that Sharon gave a tight schedule as the reason for his refusal.

Israel Radio reported that Sharon will convene his cabinet upon his return from Washington. The media reported that mainstream Likud cabinet ministers such as Ehud Olmert and Tzippi Livni welcomed the U.S.-Israeli understandings. Israel Radio noted that Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu greeted the achievements reached at Wednesday's meeting, but has reservations about the U.S. position on the route of the fence. The radio noted that FM Silvan Shalom has not expressed himself in the matter, and quoted Minister Uzi Landau as saying that he is calling on the Likud to thwart Sharon's plan, commitments by former U.S. presidents have not been kept. Landau specifically mentioned Ronald Reagan's pledge that Saudi fighter planes would not be stationed near Israel's border. Yediot quoted settler leader Shaul Goldstein as saying: "Bush's statements about beginning to evacuate settlements are very dangerous. He didn't even mention keeping settlement blocs." IDF Radio

reported that former PM Ehud Barak has called on Sharon to finish building the separation fence quickly as part of an emergency program before the withdrawal from Gaza and the removal of settlements from the West Bank. Barak called upon the Labor Party to provide, under certain circumstances, a safety net to Sharon against right-wing opposition, but also criticized him for proposing the disengagement plan only now. Yahad party leader and Geneva Accord co-initiator Yossi Beilin told Israel Radio that he fears that Sharon's plan could mark the end of Sharon's concessions.

Ha'aretz (English Ed.) published a Letter to the Editor by Peace Now secretary-general Yariv Oppenheimer, who endorses "every evacuation of land in the occupied territories," along with the Geneva Accord. Oppenheimer writes that Peace Now is convinced that its position will not cause a conflict inside the peace camp.

Leading media quoted PA Chairman Yasser Arafat, Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) and other Palestinian officials as saying that the understandings between the U.S. and Israel signify the end of the peace process. Qurei said that Bush is the first U.S. president to recognize settlements. The media quoted Geneva Accord co-initiator and former PA minister Yasser Abed Rabbo as saying that the road map has been replaced by Sharon's plan.

This morning, Israel Radio reported that the Irish EU presidency responded to the Bush-Sharon meeting by saying that any plan to allow Israel to hold onto territory captured in 1967 must be with the consent of the Palestinians.

Israel Radio reported that this morning Al Jazeera-TV and Al Arabiya-TV released an audiotape purportedly from Osama bin Laden, threatening to exact revenge on Israel for the assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

Ha'aretz reported that two weeks ago the IDF arrested a 16-year-old Palestinian who admitted to having been a "talent scout" for Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades would-be suicide bombers.

Leading media reported that Wednesday twelve people were wounded in clashes between Border Police and protesters demonstrating against the fence at Biddu village, west of Jerusalem. The media also reported that two youths were wounded in clashes between settlers and security forces at the site of the Hazon David outpost between Kiryat Arba and Hebron.

Jerusalem Post cited a poll conducted among Palestinians by the Gaza-based General Institute for Information:

-94.1 percent of Palestinians believe there is a state of lawlessness and chaos in PA-controlled territories.
-Only 29.2 percent of the respondents blame the Israeli occupation for the failure of the PA to enforce law and order; 25 percent believe that the PA leadership is responsible for the anarchy because it has lost control over the situation; 19.1 percent blame the absence of a proper judicial system; 16 percent say that the problem is the existence of centers of power within the PA; 25 percent say the PA security forces are responsible for the deterioration.

Sharon Visit April 14:

Summary:

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote from Washington on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Wednesday, President Bush gave Sharon winning cards in his campaign for the registered Likud members, and what Bush did not give, the negative, if not hysterical, reaction in the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority will."

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Israel would do well not to ignore Bush's words. The American leader again promised the Palestinians a viable state, and a state cannot be viable when it is made up of patches of territory."

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote on page one of popular, pluralist Maariv: "We must not miss the fact that Bush is embracing Sharon, adopting disengagement, going with it and describing it as a courageous and daring historical step."

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote on page one of *Maariv*: "Bush's declaration sounded so pro-Israel that no one in Ramallah or Gaza will dare to stand in the suicide bombers' way." Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in *Ha'aretz*: "Just because Bush and Sharon have written a new script for the Palestinians doesn't mean they will follow it."

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in the editorial of *Yediot Aharonot*: "Bush justly referred to Sharon's decision to withdraw as a 'historic decision'; indeed it is historic, and a majority of the Israeli people supports it. As to the national-diplomatic achievement of Sharon's visit to Bush, things are far more equivocal."

Conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* editorialized: "It is a measure of how far Israel's diplomatic position has fallen that yesterday's exchange of letters between George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon should be considered a signal victory."

Columnist Haggai Huberman wrote in nationalist, Orthodox *Hatzofe*: "For 36 years the United States has advocated an Israeli withdrawal from Judea, Samaria and Gaza [the territories]. Contrary to Sharon's request, Bush made no real commitment Wednesday about the final status arrangement."

Block Quotes:

I. "Bush Has Already Voted"

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote from Washington on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot* (April 15): "Wednesday, President Bush gave Sharon winning cards in his campaign for the registered Likud members, and what Bush did not give, the negative, if not hysterical, reaction in the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority will. Bush gave Sharon words, just words, but what words. Sharon is right when he says that Israel has not received words like those since the establishment of the State of Israel -- and certainly not since 1967.... With all the festive talk about the road map and about its stated goal -- the establishment of a Palestinian state -- both the Bush administration and Sharon have moved further away from the vision of a Palestinian state. Until now the Palestinians have had a government without a state. Now they are being offered a state without a government. There probably isn't anything like that in the world.... Sharon has urged people [Israelis] not to rush out and dance in the streets. The President's letter is no Balfour Declaration. With that having been said, after his meeting with Bush, he acted like someone who has already won the campaign."

II. "Double-Edge Bush"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (April 15): "Whoever tries to present U.S. President George Bush's statements as the second Balfour Declaration in terms of their importance to Israel, is getting carried away. The most significant achievement was the emphasis placed on the fact that a solution for the Palestinian refugees will be outside the borders of the Jewish state, as Israel has long demanded. In other words, if the right of return' exists, it will be realized inside a future Palestinian state, and not inside Israel, which Bush again defined as a Jewish state. On the territorial front, however, the achievement is only partial, and Israel would do well not to ignore Bush's words. The American leader again promised the Palestinians a viable state, and a state cannot be viable when it is made up of patches of territory."

III. "Presidential Embrace"

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote on page one of popular, pluralist *Maariv* (April 15): "Wednesday, Sharon got his hug, and his candy too. It is reasonable to assume that he will rise in the polls that are really important, the [Likud] party members' polls.... What is great about Bush's statements Wednesday is that they can be interpreted in any direction. Here, there and everywhere. Nonetheless, we must not miss the fact that Bush is embracing Sharon, adopting disengagement, going with it and describing it as a courageous and daring historical step. Bush is telling members of the Likud: 'You need to support Sharon on his own merits. Who am I to defend him? But do not forget: a "no" to Sharon is

also a "no" to America.' And America is not in a situation where it is willing to hear one more no. Certainly not from us."

IV. "He Got It"

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote on page one of Maariv (April 15): "As of last night, Sharon was the big winner. If the Likud referendum were to be held today he would receive the full dividend. But nothing is final yet. Europe will rebel against America. The Arab world will not acquiesce. The crescendo of Bush and Sharon is so deafeningly loud that Abu Ala will not be able to praise the unilateral withdrawal as he had planned. If these developments lead to a resumption of Palestinian terror in full force -- because Bush's declaration sounded so pro-Israel that no one in Ramallah or Gaza will dare to stand in the suicide bombers' way -- the achievement could turn into a Pyrrhic victory. Too much success at a heavy price necessarily carries the seeds of failure. But not last night. As of now the celebrations are at their height. A great achievement for Sharon, with question marks nearby."

V. "Rewriting the Script"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in Ha'aretz (April 15): "Sharon exploited Bush's current political weakness, but paid back the president with public praise for his leadership in the war against terrorism and a refusal to meet with Bush's rival, Democratic front-runner John Kerry. Bush paid Sharon back with an almost transparent call on Likud rank and file to vote in favor of the plan. The Palestinians -- who weren't invited to the party -- will pay the price of the strengthened friendship between Bush and Sharon. Sharon heard the harsh reactions of the Palestinians as proof of Sharon's argument that the disengagement is a blow to the Palestinians and good for Israel. But just because Bush and Sharon have written a new script for the Palestinians doesn't mean they will follow it."

VI. "Loves a Lot, Gives a Little"

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in the editorial of Yediot Aharonot (April 15): "Bush justly referred to Sharon's decision to withdraw as a 'historic decision'; indeed it is historic, and a majority of the Israeli people supports it. As to the national-diplomatic achievement of Sharon's visit to Bush, things are far more equivocal. First of all, Bush of the spring of 2004 is not Bush of the spring of 2003... Bush's statements have a hollow ring to them. To what extent did Bush accede to Sharon's requests? Taking a superficial view, the Israeli prime minister received everything he wanted. A closer look finds that this 'everything' is merely a small addition to the traditional American positions.... Some people have compared Bush's statement to the Balfour Declaration. That is a perverse comparison. Israel today is not in the situation of the Zionist movement in 1917. Eighty-seven years ago the Jewish people did not have a state; it lived in foreign countries and needed the graces of the great powers for everything it wanted, and particularly for the realization of its national aspirations.... And another difference: President Bush today does not have an imperial mandate over the Land of Israel and Palestine, and cannot divide its land. At the very most he can make his suggestions and hope that they are accepted.... [Nonetheless], Sharon sponsored a significant political initiative and reaped significant public relations fruits. The Palestinians, as usual, did not have the sense to offer anything but more terror and, therefore, lost."

VII. "Forward to Square One"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (April 15): "It is a measure of how far Israel's diplomatic position has fallen that yesterday's exchange of letters between George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon should be considered a signal victory.... What Sharon and Bush have done is to return to pre-Camp David assumptions, thereby partly undoing the diplomatic damage wrought by the Barak-Clinton run at a final-status agreement and the terror offensive that followed. The Bush statement that the U.S. 'expects' that Israel will retain 'already existing major Israeli population centers' in a final-status agreement is significant, but not as significant as it may seem. The other shoe has yet to fall on this issue, as

nothing was said to rule out another invention of the Barak/Clinton era -- land swaps.... It is clear now that Israel must go through with Sharon's disengagement plan, as painful as it will be to implement. In a way, the plan is another terrible gamble, this time on the word of the United States that it will continue to condition Palestinian statehood on an end to terror and the establishment of a truly free and peaceful Palestinian society.... At yesterday's summit, President Bush once again came through for Israel at a crucial hour. What remains to be seen is whether his State Department will come through on the follow-up."

VIII. "The Voice Belongs to Bush, the Hands are that of the Geneva Agreement"

Columnist Haggai Huberman wrote in nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe (April 15): "Bush eventually did not say anything new and did not change anything in the traditional policy his country has maintained from 5727 [i.e. 1967] up to this very day. He only allowed commentators to pump their wares so as to facilitate the brainwashing of the registered Likud members prior to the referendum. Every other analysis is correct to the very same degree.... One need not be overly impressed with Bush's statement that the disengagement plan is an historic and courageous action that might bring progress and end one of the longest conflicts in human history. For 36 years the United States has advocated an Israeli withdrawal from Judea, Samaria and Gaza [the territories]. Contrary to Sharon's request, Bush made no real commitment Wednesday about the final status arrangement."

LEBARON